

The A to Z's of Selecting a Trainer for your Retriever

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You did your homework and purchased a great pup. The pup is six months old and ready to start formal training. You have decided that you don't have time, patience or the knowledge to train your pup yourself. You have decided to send it to a professional retriever trainer. You now need to do some homework to find a trainer that will do the best job for you and your dog. Many a good dog has been ruined because the owner just "picked" a trainer to send his dog to.

Anyone can hang out a sign and claim to be a trainer; heck they may have only trained one dog and have decided they are qualified to be a professional retriever trainer and train your dog. The first thing you need to determine is what are your goals. Will this be a hunting dog? Do you plan to run Hunt Tests? If so, what type of tests AKC, UKC, NAHRA or a combination of the above? Do you plan to Run Field Trials?

Questions you need answered before selecting a trainer for your dog:

1. How many years' experience does the trainer have training dogs?
2. Are they full time trainers, or do they hold another job full time and train your dog on the side?
3. What titles have they obtained with dogs they have trained?
4. Do they run Field Trials, Hunt Test, AKC, UKC, NAHRA?
5. Who will be training your dog while they are running test or trials?
6. How will your dog be kenneled while in training?
7. What type of training methods are used?
8. What type of training equipment does the trainer use?

How many years experience do they have training retrievers?

Retrievers are made up of different breeds, some are easy to train while others are not, some are soft, some are tuff, while others are soft and stubborn. A tough training combination. You need a trainer that has the experience to be able to train all types of dogs. How many years experience training retrievers does this trainer have? Where did he learn to train dogs from? Did he work for another trainer? What type of training does he do? Does he use an electronic collar for all dogs when training? Will he train your dog without using a collar if that is what you want? What methods does he use for force fetching--ear, toe etc.? Maybe your dog is very sensitive, can he train your dog so that the dog has a good training attitude and does not have his tail tucked between his legs? Experience is the most important part of training!

Are they full time trainers or part-time trainers?

There are some trainers who hold full time jobs and also train dogs. If this is the case with the trainer you select you need to find out who is responsible and caring for your dog, while the trainer is at work. What time does the trainer go to and get home from work. In the winter there is not much daylight, which means there is very little time for your dog to be trained. Are you paying full time training rates for a part time trainer? Trainers that train dogs on a full-time basis (this is how they earn 100% of their income) will normally have more time to do a better job of training your dog.

What titles have they obtained with dogs?

If you are planning to run Field Trials with your dog, you need to find the best trainer of Field Trial dogs, one that has proven success on a regular basis. You would not want to put a Field Trial dog with a Hunt Test trainer that does Hunt Test setups all day. Hunt Test vs. Field Trials are like apples and oranges; they are both fruits but very different. A Field Trial dog needs lots of long marks 200 to 400 yards in length, with white coats on the throwers and land and water blinds of the same distance. A Hunt Test or hunting dog needs hidden guns, blinds 100 yards and marks of 100 to 150 yards at the maximum in length, diversion birds in the face, walk ups with other dogs, etc. Ask for a list of accomplishments they have had. If they are Hunt Test trainers and you want to run at the highest level, Master, how many dogs have they titled at that level? Not all Hunt Tests are the same. AKC Hunt Tests are different then UKC Hunt Tests. In AKC you carry a gun but never shoot it. In UKC you carry a gun and do shoot all the birds going down as well as the blinds. You are shooting poppers not live rounds; but your dog must learn to swing with the gun and the marks are closer to your dog, and you really need good control of your dog. Training for AKC and UKC Hunt Tests are different. Be sure to find a trainer that is training for the type of test you plan on running.

Ask the trainer for a list of recommendations from people whose dogs they have trained. **Take the time to check the references out.** If a trainer does not want to provide you with references, you need to find an another trainer. Ask the people you call if they were happy with the training their dog received and would they send another dog to the trainer. Your answer to these two questions will tell you all you need to know.

Who will be training your dog while the trainer is at hunt tests?

If your dogs is in training but is not running tests, you need to find out what happens to your dog while the trainer is at tests. If a trainer goes to tests and runs dogs and leaves for the Hunt Test on Thursday, to run a test, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, what happens to your dog while the trainer is away? Is your dog just sitting in the kennel and getting trained 3 days a week. If they have an assistant trainer, what experience does he have in training dogs? You also want to talk to them and be sure you are comfortable knowing that they will be responsible for caring for and training your dog while the trainer is away.

How will your dog be kenneled while in training?

How large are the runs? What type of housing is provided for the dogs? Are the kennels on concrete? How are the dogs transported to the field for training? It is a good idea to go kennel and see where your dog will be living when he is not out training. Do the dogs in the kennel look healthy? Are they at a good weight, or are they thin? What type of dog food will be fed to your dog? Do the dogs in the kennel have fresh water? Are the kennels clean? What size are the kennel runs? Does the dog have enough room to be able to get exercise when not being trained? Are the fences high enough so that the dog cannot get out? Does the dog have shade to protect him from the sun and a good doghouse to protect him from bad weather? Remember this is where your dog will be spending his time when he is not being trained.

What type of training methods does the trainer use?

The only way you can determine this is to spend some time with the trainer. Call the trainer and tell him you are in the market for a trainer for your dog and would like to come out and see the dogs work. Go out and watch him run marks and work his dogs. You can tell a lot from just how his dogs act when taken out of the truck. Do they come to the line with tails wagging, do they seem happy. When he run the dogs, do they leave the line with tails up? If dogs come out of the truck with tails tucked, beware, this can be a tell tail sign of a trainer that may use a lot of pressure when training. Can your dog take this pressure? Do not make any final judgment on how only one dogs acts--watch the whole truck. Do you like the way the dogs run, the way they work? Do you like the way the trainer handles each dog? Most importantly, do you like the temperament of the trainer? Remember if you pick this trainer, you are putting your dog's future in his hands. This trainer is the one that will determine what actions to take when training your dog. Your retriever is depending on you to make the right choice for him. Are you comfortable with this trainer? If your answers to these questions are "yes," then maybe he is the trainer for you. If you want to be able to run your dog in tests yourself, be sure the trainer will work with you and teach you how to handle your dog so that you have success.

What type of training equipment does the trainer use?

You may wonder why I have included this. If your dog is being trained for Hunt Tests, be sure the trainer has the proper tools and equipment to do a through job of training your dog. If you are running Hunt Tests, a trainer needs to have holding blinds, blinds to hide the gunners, calls, shotguns, bird launchers, wingers, decoys for land and water, dead and live ducks--all the type of items that your dog will encounter when he runs a Hunt Test. I have seen dogs that have been professionally trained fail at licensed Hunt Tests because wingers were used at the test, or the dog would not sit outside of a holding blind with the handler behind it, or dog would not sit in a holding blind, or the dog retrieved a duck decoy, the dog was afraid of the land goose decoys, the dog did know how to swing with the shotgun for each mark being thrown, etc.; all because the trainer did not have the proper training equipment to use when training the dog--the type of props that the dog would encounter when running a Hunt Test.

If you do your homework, you will find the right trainer for your retriever pup. It is not simple to find a good trainer for your dog. Knowing what questions to ask and what qualities to look for in a trainer will all pay off when you pick up your well-trained happy retriever.

Good luck.